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Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris* in the Northern Territory

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Abstract

The Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris* is a trans-equatorial migrant seabird that breeds in the austral summer in southern Australia (prineipally in Tasmania and Victoria, with smaller numbers breeding in New South Wales, South Australia and southern Western Australia) (Marchant & Higgins 1990). Post-breeding, the speeies migrates to the north Pacific where non-breeding colonies stay during the months of May–September (Marehant & Higgins 1990). This is Australia's most abundant seabird, population estimate 13.1–16.5 million breeding pairs (Ross *et al.* 1996), and can be seen in considerable numbers off eastern and southern Australia during migration and the breeding season. Migrating birds are regularly reeorded from Tasmania to south-eastern Queensland (Marehant & Higgins 1990), but do not generally occur in tropical northern Australian waters. We report the first confirmed record of Short-tailed Shearwater in the Northern Territory, and one of the few tropical Australian reeords of the speeies.

Between approximately 1820 and 1845 on 14 January 2011, a Short-tailed Shearwater was observed and photographed from Stokes Hill Wharf, Darwin Harbour, Darwin, Northern Territory (12°28'16"S, 130°50'54"E) (Figure 1) by the authors and three other loeal birdwatchers. The bird was initially sighted on the water, where it remained for the majority of the observation period. It took flight only onee, over a short distance (approximately 20 m). At times the bird was very elose to the wharf and was observed and photographed from above. It stretched its wings onee, allowing views of the underwing. The remiges and reetrices were noted to be worn. Towards the end of the observation period it slowly swam/drifted in a south-easterly direetion into Darwin Harbour and was out of sight by approximately 1845 h. Visits to the same location on the evenings of 15 and 16 January 2011 could not relocate the bird.

Stokes Hill Wharf eonsists of an old shipping shed that has been converted into a series of food outlets and outdoor eating areas and is a popular dining loeation, particularly on weekends. A number of birds, in partieular Silver Gulls *Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae* and Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii*, are attraeted to the wharf, as diners

Figure 1. Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris*, Stokes Hill Wharf, Darwin Harbour, 14 January 2011. Note the darkish legs and feet and the short, rounded tail with the wing projecting beyond the tail in the top photo, and the pale underwing in the bottom photo. (Micha V. Jackson)

often distribute their leftover food (primarily hot potato chips and deep-fried seafood) to birds. The Short-tailed Shearwater was observed on a Friday evening when a large crowd of diners was present, and food was being made available to birds regularly. In addition to Silver Gulls and Crested Terns, two Common Terns *Sterna hirundo* and six Bridled Terns *Onychoprion anaethetus* were also present during the observation period; the Short-tailed Shearwater appeared to be actively feeding on the water's surface amongst these other species. One juvenile Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* was also flying low overhead.

The bird was identified as a Short-tailed Shearwater by its overall brownish plumage with a paler grey underwing panel and pale chin and throat; short, rounded tail; darkish legs and feet; rounded head profile; and relatively short, stubby bill (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Onley & Scofield 2007; Shirihai 2007) (Figure 1). Features separating it from the Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica* include the darkish legs and feet (fleshy-white to pale pink in Wedge-tailed Shearwater), pale grey underwing panel (all dark in Wedge-tailed Shearwater), short, rounded tail (long and wedge-shaped in Wedge-tailed Shearwater), and shorter bill (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Onley & Scofield 2007). Furthermore, on the water, the primary projection extended noticeably beyond the tail (Figure 1). Short-tailed Shearwaters are also bulkier with narrower, straighter wings than Wedge-tailed Shearwaters (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Onley & Scofield 2007). Features separating this bird from the Sooty Shearwater *A. grisea* include the less extensive and pale greyish underwing panels (typically more extensive silvery-white underwing panels in Sooty Shearwater), the more rounded head and higher forehead (rather than the flat-headed appearance of Sooty Shearwater), and the shorter, stubbier bill (Onley & Scofield 2007; Shirihai 2007).

There are few confirmed tropical Australian records of Short-tailed Shearwaters, and none from the Northern Territory (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Barrett *et al.* 2003). The species is a vagrant to northeast Queensland, with records north to Cairns (16°55'S, 145°46'E) (Baker & Gill 1974; Longmore 1985; Marchant & Higgins 1990), and one record from north of Lockhart River on Cape York Peninsula (~12°40'S, 143°24'E) (Barrett *et al.* 2003). In northwest Western Australia, there is a single record of a beach-washed bird on Cable Beach in Broome (17°55'S, 122°12'E) (Hassell 1999) and sightings of four birds at sea in Joseph Bonaparte Gulf (C. Hassell, pers. comm.). The Darwin observation represents the first confirmed record of the species for the Northern Territory. However, Noske and Brennan (2002) reported two probable Short-tailed Shearwaters from Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory sector of the Gulf of Carpentaria. These birds were located on Six Mile Beach, Groote Eylandt (13°56'S, 136°47'E) on 8 May 1999; one bird was dead but the specimen was not retained, while the other bird was rehabilitated and released on 13 May 1999 (Noske & Brennan 2002). Noske and Brennan (2002) present a photograph of the rehabilitated bird, and comment that '... its large size, short tail, dark legs and short, dark bill ...' suggest Short-tailed Shearwater. Although likely to represent records of Short-tailed Shearwaters, the lack of additional photographs, descriptions

and measurements, and the disposal of the dead specimen, preclude certain identification.

The only other all-dark shearwater to have been previously recorded in the Northern Territory is the Wedge-tailed Shearwater, a tropical species that has been documented on several occasions in coastal waters around Darwin during monsoonal storm events in the months of January and February (McKean & Gray 1973; McKean *et al.* 1975; Thompson 1977). Similarly, many of the records of Short-tailed Shearwater from northern Australia (Baker & Gill 1974; Longmore 1985; Hassell 1999; C. Hassell, pers. comm.; this manuscript) have been associated with intense tropical weather systems. The northwest Australian Short-tailed Shearwater record and sightings coincided with weather associated with tropical cyclones, with the record of the Broome bird in December and the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf sightings in February (Hassell 1999; C. Hassell, pers. comm.). Consistent with these observations, the Darwin Short-tailed Shearwater record occurred during a period of monsoonal storms with strong onshore winds. These conditions had pushed several infrequently-occurring seabirds into Darwin Harbour, including large numbers of Lesser Frigatebirds and moderate numbers of Bridled Terns (pers. obs.). These weather conditions commenced on 11 January 2011 and had dissipated by 15 January 2011.

Even though the Short-tailed Shearwater is primarily a migratory species of the Pacific Ocean, there has been suggestion of regular movements to the northern Indian Ocean, although these remain poorly understood (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Hassell 1999). The sighting of the Darwin individual in January, which is outside the usual migration period for the species, suggests that this individual probably was not undertaking a normal seasonal movement to the northern Indian Ocean. Given the abundance of this species and its highly migratory nature, it is not surprising that it should occur, on occasion, outside its normal distribution.

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